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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/21/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAIR](#) [PM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: VENEZUELA DETAINS COPA AIRLINES PLANE

Classified By: DCM David Gilmour, Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Vice President and Foreign Minister Juan Carlos Varela told Ambassador September 21 that Venezuela had recently detained a COPA Airlines 737 in Maracaibo for two days, evidently in retaliation for the GOP having permitted anti-Chavez protests in Panama earlier this month.

¶2. (C) Varela said the Venezuelans had detained the aircraft ostensibly because its flight safety paperwork was not in order (NOTE: COPA operates all late model B737s, and their fleet is one of the youngest in the hemisphere). Varela said he spent an entire weekend making phone calls and negotiating with the Venezuelans to get the plane released.

¶3. (C) President Ricardo Martinelli has made it clear that his government is strongly opposed to Chavez' policies, and Martinelli is proud to cast himself as a bulwark against extreme leftwing governments in the region. Martinelli and Varela have both been sympathetic to the de facto Micheletti government in Honduras. Concerning this particular incident with the COPA plane, Varela said "He (Chavez) was testing us."

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